

Standardized Testing in a Non-Standardized World

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In the passionate debate that surrounds the issue of multiculturalism in Waldorf education, one component is usually: the way in which children are assessed in a Waldorf school. It is good for us to remind ourselves that Waldorf schools do little in the way of classroom testing, and that in most states, children attending Waldorf schools do not have to take standardized tests until the high school. This gives every Waldorf teacher the freedom to assess the individual child *as a whole person*, taking into consideration those cultural, economic and family factors which, while supposedly “ignored” in a standardized examination, may lead to profound inequities in test scores and evaluations.

Although most Waldorf teachers recognize the flawed nature of such exams as the SATs, when talking to parents they tend to be apologetic about the fact that Waldorf students do not score well on “aptitude” tests. Were we to delve a little more deeply into the history of the SATs as an American institution, we might realize that our attitude towards Waldorf students’ scores should be closer to pride than embarrassment. What follows is a *précis* of several readily available articles that might serve as a springboard for a teacher’s own research in this most interesting area.

For more than half a century, *The Atlantic Monthly* has published articles that can help us to trace the development of standardized tests as a pillar of modern American education. Over the last decade, authors writing for the Atlantic have joined in the growing chorus of critics who believe that the SAT’s are contributing to the growth of an American elite which is by no means “classless” and “meritocratic,” but which is rather drawn from a demographic group primarily Caucasian, upper-middle class and culturally Eurocentric. Since the same charges are sometimes leveled against Waldorf schools, it could be of great value to Waldorf teachers to familiarize themselves with the current critiques of the SAT’s, and to compare standardized assessment methods with the personalized assessment techniques found in the Waldorf schools.

Current issues and archives of *The Atlantic Monthly* may be accessed on microfiche at the local public library, while the more adventurous can doubleclick to the magazine’s site on the World Wide Web (<http://www2.theatlantic.com>) and find articles that are already linked according to subject matter. A few mouseclicks take us to the year 1942 and James B. Conant’s impassioned pleas for the establishment of a classless American meritocracy, its members not selected according to parentage and social advantage, but purely according to ability:

Conant urged the military not to pick officers from the college-educated population only, because “a college education is a privileged position based on family finances.” Only public education, he said again, could restore the key American ideals of opportunity, democracy, and classlessness.

Standardized testing-which was being developed rapidly under the duress of the World War 11 draft-would be the means whereby this “meritocracy” could be developed. In 1943, another article by Conant appeared, in which he idealistically envisioned that education alone could provide “the equivalent of those magic lands of the old frontier” in “a highly mechanized, industrial age.” And the end of the war would be “a God-given moment for reintroducing the American concept of a fluid society,” in which people’s roles would be “determined by their merit, their talents, their character, and their grit.” (It is difficult to imagine anyone’s believing that today’s Scholastic Aptitude Tests would have anything to say about a students “character” and “grit,” or even her “merit and talent.”)

The next website selection takes us to 1980. In his *Atlantic* article. “The Tests and the ‘Brightest’: How Fair are the College Boards?,” James Fallows traces the history of standardized testing back to the first IQ tests, developed less than a century ago:

...the first crude IQ tests were used mainly for racial and ethnic exclusion. In 1912, on the basis of tests run at Ellis Island, Henry Goddard scientifically proved that 83 percent of Jews were “feeble-minded,” along with 90 percent of Hungarians, 79 percent of Italians, and 81 percent of Russians (most of them Russian Jews). Modern ETS researchers recall with sad smiles the miraculous finding, some years after the Ellis Island tests, that Jews and Italians improved dramatically in intelligence after they had lived in the country for a while, and that their children, raised as English-speakers, seemed somehow to have been spared their parents’ feeble-minded genes. [Modern ETS researchers] have heard the sample question from the Lorge-Thorndike IQ test that John Weiss of Project DETEST uses to illustrate racial stereotyping and bias in standardized tests:

When a dove begins to associate with crows, its feathers remain _____, but its heart crows black.

A)Black B)White C)Dirty D)Spread E)Good

They are saying, in effect, that the SAT-like the IQ tests that precede it in elementary school, and the graduate school admissions tests that follow later on-is fundamentally unfair; far from serving as agents of diversity and social mobility, such tests reinforce and legitimize every inequality that now exists. As James Loewen, a sociologist from Catholic University’s Center for National Policy Review, concluded, “standardized tests are the greatest single barrier to equal opportunity, at least in the sphere of education.”

It is interesting to realize the horns of the dilemma upon which Conant’s impassioned call for a classless meritocracy was placed. On the one hand, there is the goal: a culture which is egalitarian, since intelligence and “grit” transcend all social inequalities. On the other hand, there is the means to that end: standardized tests which are, by their very nature, heavily tinged with the current prejudices of whichever class or group is dominant at the time of their creation.

This intractable problem is emphasized still more in our last selection, which takes us to the most recent *Atlantic* study of standardized testing, Nicholas Lemann’s two-part article in August and September of 1995. Entitled *The Structure of Success in America*, these articles focus on the development of the Educational Testing Service, the powerful corporation that administers the SAT’s and a number of other examinations, and trace its growth through the biographies of individuals who were significant in its unfolding. One of the most interesting of these sketches deals with the life and work of Carl Brigham, in many respects the “father of the SAT,” whose work in the 1920s and 1930s was fundamental in establishing “psychometrics” as an accepted science.

Carl Brigham,... like many psychometricians of the day, [was] an enthusiastic member of the eugenics movement. Brigham fully accepted the prevailing division of the population of Europe into three races-Nordic, Alpine, and Mediterranean-and shared the eugenicists’ alarm over the pre-dominance of the supposedly inferior latter two of these in the American immigrant population. In 1923 Brigham published a book called A Study of American Intelligence, introduced by Yerkes, which analyzed the Alpha and Beta results by race and came to the grim conclusion—based, Brigham insisted, on a dispassionate scientific examination of the evidence and not on prejudice—that

“American intelligence is declining, and will proceed with an accelerating rate as the racial admixture becomes more and more extensive.”

To his credit, within a decade, Brigham had repudiated this theory, writing that *A Study of American Intelligence* was “without foundation” and that the IQ was “one of the most glorious fallacies in the history of science.” Indeed, shortly before his death, Brigham rejected the very idea of standardized testing with eloquent power:

If the unhappy day ever comes when teachers point their students toward these newer examinations, and the present weak and restricted procedures get a grip on education, then we may look for the inevitable distortion of education in terms of tests. And that means that mathematics will continue to be completely departmentalized and broken into disintegrated bits, that the sciences will become highly verbalized and that computation, manipulation and thinking in terms other than verbal will be minimized, that languages will be taught for linguistic skills only without reference to literary values, that English will be taught for reading alone, and that practice and drilling the writing of English will disappear.

Compare this to a quote from the Fallows article cited above: “Standardized tests are used from the cradle to the grave, to select, reject, stratify, classify, and sort people,” said Gerda Steele of the NAACP, “and they are used in ways that keep certain segments of the population from realizing their aspirations. Most of all they limit the access of blacks and other minorities to higher education.”

What Lemann terms “The Great Sorting” has undoubtedly contributed to the increasing racial polarization of our society, to the greater concentration of wealth in the hands of an ever smaller proportion of the population, and to the development of a technocratic elite which seems more insensitive to social ills than Conant would have imagined possible. In its approach to assessment, Waldorf education may hold an essential key to unlocking the potential of the whole human being, regardless of race, ethnicity or economic status. It is missing the mark to judge a school or an educational system’s relationship to diversity based on its curriculum alone. Such factors as its teachers and its assessment methods are no less important. The more that standardized testing is studied, the more we can realize the potential that Waldorf methodology holds for the future of education in America.